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THE FUNCTION OF MILITARY HISTORY ¹

The modern historian disclaims any purpose in writing history save to reproduce, as nearly as the evidence will permit, the events of which he is writing. His ideal is not to interpret those events with any ulterior motive in view, but to let his narrative reflect the evidence which has come before him so clearly that the reader will see for himself just what has taken place and will be able, if he must have an interpretation, to make one for himself. In no branch of history is this ideal so difficult of attainment as in military history, because in this field popular prejudices are more clearly pronounced than in any other, and the readers do not desire the plain statement of events about which familiar traditions have grown up.

The military historian, further, has a very complex audience to satisfy, and he is expected to provide an interpretation pleasing to a great variety of tastes. The public has its hobbies, varying in every locality, and will not accept any detraction from the reputation of its heroes, nor any praise of men whom it considers villains. The government demands that facts discreditable to itself, its officers, or its troops, shall be suppressed or at least softened in the telling. The old soldier demands heroic tales, exaggerations of deeds of valor of his party and his favorites. Still another force is brought to bear by the military man, who demands a technical description the study of which may be useful to him in his profession, but which is without meaning or interest to the civilian.

A further difficulty confronts the military historian in the special problems which arise in dealing with military sources and the technical mastery of military science which he must gain before he can understand and interpret those sources. In view of the pitfalls which beset his path, is it any wonder that we have as yet almost nothing that is historically sound relating to

¹ This paper was read before the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in Nashville, Tennessee, April 28, 1916.

our own military history, nor, for the matter of that, to the military history of any other country?

Today another, and quite natural demand comes from the pacifists, urging that military history be suppressed, and that all histories be rewritten eliminating those blots upon civilization called wars. I say, quite natural, because as history is generally written wars are presented as irrational blotches, and not in their true light as intense moments in the life of the participating communities. Granting their premises, the demand of the pacifists is not unreasonable; but their premises are, I believe, misconceived.

Why are wars fought? To answer this question we must know the men in control of the government, and the interests which controlled them. For instance: it is popularly supposed that the question of slavery incited the civil war; that the north fought for its suppression, the south for its maintenance. The constitutional historian may assert that the question of states' rights was the knotty problem which brought about the war. The historian who examines the facts knows that the civil war was fought because, in this country of popular government, the people of the various communities thought their interests were at stake and that those interests were worth fighting for. The interests of the various sections of the north differed in character though they led to one end. The people of the New England states had one reason, the people of Pennsylvania another, and the people of Iowa a quite distinct third reason for believing it vitally important for them not to permit the Confederate States to separate themselves and establish a separate government over a part of the United States. The people of the cotton states had a more common interest; but it was not the same as that which actuated the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia to secede. With the latter, the question was the difficult one of whether they should join the cotton states which had already seceded, or remain with the northern states in the union.

In answering that question an internal conflict of local interests arose which was decided one way in Missouri, another way in Kentucky, and a third way in Tennessee. In none of these states was the decision a unanimous one. Many who had op-

posed the secession movement in Tennessee before the state had voted to secede gave in afterwards, joined the secession party and fought for it. Others who could not be reconciled to such a course, particularly in east Tennessee, remained union men and fought openly or secretly for the union.

It may be asked if I am advocating the economic interpretation of wars. I reply that if the economic interests are the most vital, then economic interests will decide the question. If, however, racial, or religious, or any other interests predominate, those interests will decide it. At the bottom the interests that impel to war are not personal but communal ones. The average individual will not put his life in jeopardy for personal gain, as he must if he goes to war; but he will do so for the existence or betterment of the life of his race or group. On the whole, a careful analysis of the motives underlying war leads to the conclusion that people do not rush into an armed struggle except when a conflict of vital interests can not be settled otherwise.

This statement may seem commonplace; but its truth is not generally understood or recognized in this country. If it were we should not find men and women asserting that the United States can never have another war. Instead we should have the people asking each other, "What are the conflicts of interests between ourselves and other nations? Are they likely to become so acute as to lead to war, and if so, when? What would be our chances of success in such a war?" In answering these questions we need to remember that, though it takes two to make a quarrel, the nation, unlike the individual, cannot run away. It is, so to speak, planted, and if attacked it cannot escape; its only alternative is to fight back, or to lie down and be trampled upon or crushed out of existence. Hence we need to inquire what are the interests of other nations which conflict, or may in future conflict with ours, not only from our point of view, but from theirs.

Much is talked nowadays of national morality and international justice. No one proposes, however, to give back this continent to its original owners, the Indians, nor to arrange for a commission to decide whether or not Asiatics have as much right as we have to colonize our Pacific coast. We consider that California is ours because we want our children and no others to possess

it. We consider, perhaps, that the interests of civilization demand that we, as the highest representatives of civilized humanity, have a vested right to this domain. We should not forget that other nations, races, and groups, look down upon us with the same lofty disdain with which many of us regard the so-called "inferior races." They consider that we are a conglomerate and degenerate people contaminating the earth and that the interests of humanity would be served by blotting us out of existence.

It would be illuminating to indicate the development of some of the conflicts of interests which have brought about wars in the past, but such a course is not essential for the present purpose. My aim is not to uphold a given thesis of interpretation of the causes of various wars, but to point out the need for the statement of the historical facts in regard to them. In a country governed by a class or group it matters not, for the immediate interests of the nation, what the histories lead the people to believe so long as those controlling the government understand the real facts. But under a popular government such as ours it is vital to the nation's existence and future progress that the truth be told in the common histories, so that the people may harbor no fallacies about the causes and the course of wars.

The next subject for military history to make clear is the nature of wars. The pacifist group conceive of a war as a sort of tournament in which the Red army fights the Blue army and in which, after the armies are fought out, the opposing governments patch up their differences somehow, and war stops. Now war is not one army fighting another army. It is one people fighting another people. The army is simply a part of the power of the people, organized for striking a blow or resisting a blow on land, just as the navy is organized for striking or resisting a blow at sea. That blow may be directed at the opposing army, but, if it be, it is not because that army is the ultimate objective, but because of the principle that if you would rob a strong man's house, it is in every way advisable first to bind the strong man before proceeding to the robbery. In the same way we may say that the aim of the prize fighter is not to ruin his antagonist's fists, but to break down his guard and then deliver a knock-out blow on his solar plexus or his head.

Nor is the contest limited to fists. In war the food is snatched from the opponents' mouths. England is today seeking to starve Germany and Germany is seeking to starve England, just as the north in the civil war sought to starve the south. This starving process means death to many babies and aged weak; but that is precisely the meaning of war: "Shall it be *our* babies which shall grow up and flourish and inhabit the land, or shall it be *their* babies?" The American, in his semi-peopled paradise says: "Why can it not be *all* the babies?" But when another century shall have passed and this continent is fully peopled, Americans too will feel the pinch, if indeed any of those we now think of as Americans still dwell in this land, except as a subject race.

Next to the food question in war comes the problem of raiment. England will not let Germany have cotton or wool for clothing, or leather for shoes. The north in the civil war would not let the south have these things, and not only the soldiers but the whole civil population of the south suffered for lack of proper clothing.

Not only is the food and clothing supply of the nation at war attacked, but the whole financial system of a belligerent country is under fire. It is not at all unusual in railroad competition in this country for one railroad to seek to undermine the credit of another: the price of its bonds and stock, and its ability to raise money. This occasional conflict between competitive corporations becomes the rule between nations at war. The whole business acumen of each country is directed towards bringing about the depreciation of the enemy's currency and the destruction of his credit. The financial conflict, in a war of today, is waged not only in every part of belligerent countries, but also in every part of every neutral, semi-neutral or unneutral land on earth.

As a part of this campaign on the currency, the credit, and the international rate of exchange, there comes inevitably the attack upon the good name, the honor, the self-respect, the courage, and every other quality which makes for manhood and womanhood in the opponent. When Bernard Shaw protested against the British campaign of vituperation and invective against Germany in the present war, saying, "Let us scorn to employ against the Germans any weapons meaner than our steel," he spoke as a gentleman, but not as one knowing war.

To my mind this campaign of press villification is the most degrading thing about war of today; but it is an effective weapon, and, if the combatants be at all equally matched, neither can afford not to employ it. As we read the journals and pamphlets of the civil war period we open our eyes wide in amazement at the extravagant absurdities that appear on every page. How could a man of intelligence think or say such things, and, if said or written, how could men of even common school education give credence to the stuff! Yet this campaigning is as much a part of war as are attacks on the enemy's army, navy, food, clothing and finance. Such things have to be said, and people be made to believe them. Ever since the days of the Greeks and Romans, peoples with great forensic talents have always had no inconsiderable advantage in war.

During the present war the newspapers have been filled with the same nonsense about the war, or perhaps even greater nonsense, than was the case in the civil war. During the Philippine insurrection the natives were told and actually made to believe that American soldiers roasted babies on spits and then ate them. Of course such a story could only be credited where no American troops had yet penetrated; but in the present war thousands of just such idle tales are being told and are receiving credence among those who are not on the scene or whose sympathies make them gullible. It is commonly said that the strength of the allies in this war lies in the French army and the British navy. Fifty years hence, I venture to predict, historians will speak of the British press campaign as the greatest arm of the entente powers in this war, and will place the French army second.

By this press campaign I do not mean to include merely atrocity stories and gross fabrications out of whole cloth, but descriptions of armies, of the deeds of armies, of the size of armies, battles, casualties, the objects of campaigns, battles, the results of battles and consequences of campaigns. Everything that takes place in war should be and, under an efficient playing of the game, will be distorted just as far as the people can be made to believe. This process of falsification, naturally, varies indirectly with success. Perhaps never before in the history of the world have such crude absurdities about war been bandied about in the

press and in the mouths of the people as they are being today in America. Had historians of military affairs in the past made clear the real nature of war I question whether these crude fallacies would now be passing current as the cold coin of truth.

That part of military history which deals with the actual operations of armies and fleets is commonly supposed to be of no interest to the civilian. In this country, up to the outbreak of the present war, no one — press, people or president — cared to know whether the volunteers or the regulars were the better soldiers; whether we had an army or did not have an army; and whether Captain Jones or Brigadier General Brown were efficient or inefficient officers. Today press and people would like to know all these things, — and the experience of the future may make a certainty of the presumption of the value of such knowledge.

War, to the average American, calls up pictures of the Lexington minute-men with musket and powder horn driving back the British regulars, and subsequently holding Bunker Hill against the regulars' assault. Of course these visions are not at all historically true; but he does not know this, nor does he care to know it. He regards the householder with gun in his hand, defending his hearthstone, as a rock of invincibility against which the militarism of the world may beat in vain.

There was a time, not much over a century ago, when such a conception was accurate enough. There was also a time, — several decades less than a century ago, — when there were no railroads, and the country improvised them, just as it improvised armies. The rails were wooden logs or boards; a horse or mule or home-made engine propelled the car. Compare such an enterprise, established on a basis of a thousand dollars of capital and operated by half a dozen men, with the New York Central system or the Pennsylvania railroad system of today, and you will have a fair basis for comparison of the armies of the revolution and the armies of Europe today.

Suppose that in this country we had never built any iron railroad or steam locomotives, or established any traffic system, or operating system, and suppose, further, that we had no one in this country who had ever seen a real locomotive or a terminal switch-yard, and had only a few men who had even read about

such things; how long would it take us to improvise the New York Central system? Do you answer "Fifty years? Forty years, by importing some railroad men to do the work? It all depends on the man at the top?" Yes, and we might also, — with rare good luck and proper management, — create a good modern army in just about forty years.

Now let us compare such an army with the armed and disciplined but untrained forces of the civil war — which were as good as we could hope to produce in four years' time, beginning right now, were we to do it over again. The conduct and the leadership of our civil war armies represented about the same stage of evolution, compared to the present day development of military science, as a western railroad of civil war times does to a present day trans-continental system.

This is not apparent at first sight because our histories do not give us facts. Our people have naught but illusions about this war. First, they conceive that we raised an army of a million men in 1861. The fact is that it took us four years to raise the million men. Next, they conceive that we improvised, — out of politicians, preachers, storekeepers and the like, — great generals. We did improvise generals of *great reputations* but — what are the facts? Horrible mismanagement, butchery of men, the loss of nine out of every ten opportunities for successful action! Not the generals alone, but the officers of every grade are found wanting. It takes vastly more time to master the technique of the military profession than the civilian can conceive. The supposition that a tailor, because he is accustomed to handling shears, would be capable of performing a delicate surgical operation would be no more absurd than the pretensions of most of our civil war generals to military efficiency. The result was a long drawn out bloody conflict, brutal in character, with worse atrocities committed by irregular troops in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee than any that the world has seen since the French and Indian wars.

Suppose, now, that we should be called upon to raise an army, not of north to meet south, nor of east to meet west, but of the whole country to meet some other country having an organized modern army. Could we do more than repeat our civil war performance in numbers and efficiency? How much would it avail

us if we did duplicate our civil war performance? Even supposing we should raise twice the number of men in half the time? Would the army we should then have be able to cope with an invader's army? That is a question which our military history can and should answer. All that is needed is that the truth be told about the civil war.

The third function of military history is to state the consequence of wars.

We have seen, in the past, whole peoples reduced to serfdom by their conquerors. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, we have seen not one but many groups lose their national existence, their language, their customs, their right to educate their children in the manner, the language and the religion of their choice; and, last but not least, we have seen their ability to bear and rear progeny curbed or expanded by the decision of a longer or shorter war. We in this country have been thus far so free to choose our circumstances, and have had so much room for expansion, that it is easy for us to forget this fact. Even the local consequences of the civil war are forgotten.

Take, for example, the wealth of the southern cotton states. Estimated at four billions in the census of 1860 it was estimated in 1870 at only two billions. The value of the liberated slaves may, it is true, explain the depreciation of two billions; but even taking this into consideration, the figures show a standstill for the decade, while in many northern states, for the same period, we find the wealth doubling and trebling. What does this signify? It signifies that in the conquered states, under the conditions imposed by the conquerors, men could not live and rear children as they liked. They had to emigrate or live under unfavorable conditions.

The international moralist may contend that a knowledge of the benefits which would accrue to us from the imposition of our will upon a conquered people would be dangerous because it might very easily lead to the adoption of a policy of national aggression. But he should not forget, on the other hand, that a people ignorant of the results and consequences of war may be rudely awakened from their slumber of unpreparedness to learn by bitter experience what it means to a people to stagnate or to suffocate under the heel of a conqueror.

Here again I hold no special pleading, except to make known the facts of the case in each historical event. It may not be comfortable reading for either the northerner or the southerner to be told the true consequences of the civil war, but it will be most wholesome. Facing the facts may disturb our self-complacency, but a candid examination of the conditions of states which have been conquered, annexed or made colonies will at least warn us of the dangers of adopting as a national policy the pacifist doctrine of turning the other cheek, lest the smiter stay not his hand till he has knocked his victim down and trampled him under his feet.

Americans, are, I believe, more ignorant of the facts of military history, than any people on the earth today. The Indian realized very well that if the white man, or another Indian tribe, came and settled near him the game would be killed off and he and his children would have no means of livelihood. The Englishman understands perfectly well that the future of his children depends upon his country's ability to control the commerce of the world. How many people in this country realize what the freedom of the Panama canal for American ships means to the next generation? How many know that a diplomatic note which makes a demand is an act of war, — whether it leads to war or not? How many know that a diplomatic note which yields an important right to another nation is a sacrifice, or willing surrender, of just so much of the future of the next generation? It may be a wise sacrifice because of inability to maintain in war the right which has been yielded, or it may be “just” to surrender that right; but, however we look at international justice, we should not forget that the Englishman, the Frenchman, the German, the Russian, and the Japanese each looks upon whatever promotes the future of his nation and its progeny as a right, and that “right,” as he conceives it, he will enforce, by diplomacy if possible, but by war if necessary.

I am quite aware that in what I have said I have laid myself open to the suspicion of being about to advocate, if not already covertly advocating, some form of preparedness. As a student of military history I have about as little respect for “preparedness” of the eleventh-hour sort now under public discussion as the devil is reputed to entertain for a death-bed repentance.

However, as I direct my thoughts towards the present squabble in Europe and see, as it were, the tenants on the ground floor and those on the second story and those across the street trying to evict the well-intrenched dwellers of the first story, and as I look down the street and see the shabby oriental quarters, teeming with cramped life, where all eyes are fastened on the struggle further up the street and voices are murmuring, "Those rich people are not any better than we. Why should we pay them rent? Why should we go ill fed and have no place for our babies while they have everything?" and then — as I behold Uncle Sam living on his farm in what used to be the heart of the forest but is now the heart of the city, his fool's paradise protected by a high board fence placarded with signs saying "Keep Out," as I see all this, my heart sinks. As a student of military history I wish devoutly that Uncle Sam may learn *what the present war is about*, that he may realize how the struggle is being gained here and lost there, that he may learn to see through the fol-de-rol that the combatants are passing off on him as "facts about the war," and, especially, that he may be brought to an appreciation of his own status as a military power.

There is only one way that our Uncle Sam can learn these things, and that is by having our historians awaken, as they are now awakening, to a sense of the function of military history, and to a sense of the vital importance to our people of having the exact truth told to them in regard to war.

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